THE CONTEMOPORARY CHURCH AND TRADITIONAL WORSHIP:
ENGAGING HEART, MIND, AND SOUL
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

Back in the 1960's a psychiatrist by the name of Eric Berne took the intellectual and religious community by storm with a new therapeutic methodology called Transactional Analysis, or "TA" as we learned to call it. One of the TA school, Thomas Harris wrote a best seller *I'm OK — You're OK*, which was required reading for clergy and the source of countless sermons on grace and unconditional love, and, after its underlying thesis was examined more carefully, the source of some pretty good humor. "I'm OK —You're Not So Hot, Actually" for instance. Or "If I'm OK — and You're OK — Why is it that I Still Can't Stand You?" Eric Berne's more substantial contribution was *Games People Play* in which he proposed that in interpersonal relationships, we play carefully structured games with rules — although we are not conscious of it. The purpose of these games is to allow us to talk about what concerns us and to derive satisfaction from airing out our grievances, hopes pains, needs, without ever having to do anything about them. The game I remember most clearly is, "Ain't it awful?" It requires at least two players but can be played by an entire group, or colloquy as the case may be. The first player states the subject with a comprehensive declaration about how bad things are in whatever arena has been chosen: the quality of public education, the President's foreign policy, General Motors marketing of SUV's, violence on television, or the declining quality of public worship in the mainline Church. "Ain't it awful….." Other players join in by taking up the theme and adding other anecdotal material of crescendoing awfulness. "You think that's bad, let me tell you about what's happening over at Westminster Church." I've been a participant in a fair number of games of "Ain't it Awful" about worship and my hope is that we will not waste our time today with another round, or it's opposite and even less attractive game, "Aren't we wonderful" for being so smart, so tasteful, and so classic compared to those dull, shallow evangelicals with their praise bands and praise choruses.

The truth is we have a problem, and people like us haven't been very good or helpful in dealing with it.

The problem is that a seismic cultural shift has happened and is still in process, and our very best thinkers are struggling to understand it, name it, and describe it for us. There are a thousand ways to define it. One of them is ecclesiastically, or theologically. In a recent issue of CONTEXT, Martin Marty quotes a new book about what is happening to Christianity in Europe — the old Christendom. The late Henri Nouwen, whose name still resounds around here, made a melancholy trip before he died to his boyhood home in the Netherlands, where in one generation Roman Catholicism had faded to

a quaint ritual. A few months before his death, Nouwen spoke to a paltry crowd of 36 students at the seminary he had attended, once bustling with hundreds of eager candidates for priesthood.

Not long ago, 98% of Dutch people attended church regularly; today it's under 10%. Almost half the church buildings in Holland have been converted into restaurants, galleries, condominiums, or have been destroyed. (CONTEXT 11/15/02 from Phillip Yancey in Christianity Today 9/9/02)

An institution — the church, and an ethos — Christendom — that dominated Western Europe for 1500 years is changing radically, dramatically, and in one sense disappearing right before our eyes. And given history's inexorable movement from East to West, one has to wonder about the future of religion and the institutional church here and its traditions, its practice of worship in the future.

We are talking, of course, about what the scholars are calling postmodernism. And instead of spending my time trying to nail it down more tightly than you have no doubt already done, let me proceed anecdotally…

The culture doesn't know the vocabulary or the story any longer.

The quintessential example for me was after I preached a somewhat controversial sermon in the middle of President Clinton's crisis with a White House intern and the distinct possibility of impeachment. I told the story of King David, how flawed and human he was, and how God has a way of using even flawed, sinful people for God's purposes. A reporter for the Chicago Tribune called — "I heard you preached about Bill and Monica," he said. "Well, not exactly" I tried to respond and discovered what we're up against when he asked next. "Who was that David guy you were talking about?"

The Christian, or Judeo-Christian, or Western Christendom consensus is gone, Walter Brueggemann says. The culture doesn't even know the story any longer. What the culture most knows is something radically different from the story which used to define and organize it.

Bill McKibben, author of Returning God to the Center: Consumerism and the Environmental Threat, says that what defines and shapes our culture is not the Biblical story, or the Christian consensus, or the Judeo-Christian tradition — but television. America's kids watch an average of 4 ½ hours a day. "McKibben gathered 2400 hours of videotape — all the programs offered on TV during one day, studied them for a year, and concluded that the distillation of all those thousands of game shows and talk shows and sitcoms and commercials was the simple notion: "You are the most

important thing on the face of the earth. Your immediate desires are all that count. Do it your way. This Bud's for you." (Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time*, 99)

In that context — unique, a little frightening, not a little discouraging, you and I have an enormous responsibility — to be wise, discerning, and faithful: to be creative and at the same time authentic: to know what's happening around us and what it is our own faith calls us to do and be.

My guess is that for most of us, who we are, what we believe, and how we view the world was shaped originally by our experience of public worship — that place where religion and the world most dramatically intersect and where art — even for us stodgy heirs of the Puritans — art in windows, architecture, music — shapes our faith.

I can recall with precision what the church in which I worshiped as a child looked like. I can recall the feel of the pew cushion, the slightly musty odor, the sun streaming through the stained glass window of Jesus praying in the garden Gethsemane. I spent a lot of time looking at that window, wondering at how young he looked, how seemingly unconcerned with what was happening around him — you could see the vague shape of Peter and his friends sleeping in the background — at how clean his white robe was. I can recall Mary Wertz playing the organ up in the loft, of singing with my parents — "Holy, Holy, Holy," "For the Beauty of the Earth," and "This is my Father's World." I can recall the people who sat around us — my Uncle Charles and Aunt Helen always on the aisle, the Crawfords immediately in front of us, the Winters directly behind us — Diane and Paul, who is now a jazz musician and artist in residence at St. John the Divine, who recorded and plays with whale songs and wolf howls and who, although standing outside the church and traditional theology, finds a way to bring Bach and Isaac Watts and "Abide with Me" into his music. I remember staring at Mrs. Crawford's fabulous fox fur she wrapped over her shoulders. The fox head, with glass eyes, was directly in front of me and he and I spent many an hour staring at each other. I recall mints from Mother's purse and Dad's railroad watch which he took from his vest pocket and wound, a little too ceremoniously, when he decided the preacher had gone on too long. I recall the small door in the chancel through which the robed minister emerged — from what I thought must be a mysterious holy of holies — and watching him bow his head and put his head in his hands to pray during the prelude, an act of very impressive piety. I recall the Elders, on Communion Sunday, when Elders were elderly, older men, with white hair, walking solemnly and reverently to the first pew to sit around the table. I recall Betty Troxell, with a soprano vibrato at least a major third in breadth, who recruited her husband, Harold, the County Coroner to sing with her. When my Dad told me what Mr. Troxell actually did for a living I could never stop thinking of that every time I saw him, which was on Christmas Eve when he

and his soprano wife knocked me out cold with a powerful “O Holy Night.” (Buchanan, *Being Church, Becoming Community*, 76)

There is a lot about who I am and what I believe that was put in place, at least framed by that experience of worship.

Our greatest challenge in the overwhelmingly narcissistic context of postmodernism is to hold on to a novel idea, namely that worship is not a consumer product. In fact, and this is somewhat shocking, admittedly, worship is not even “for” the worshipper. Worship is “for” God. Kierkegaard had it right in his formula which is still the best way to describe it. People ordinarily come to worship in the same frame of mind as if they were attending theater, he said. They come as an audience to enjoy a performance put on by a professional cast: preacher, organist, choirs, sometimes dancers, bell ringers, actual chancel drama, and poetry readers. God, Kierkegaard said, was — one hoped — the prompter, standing off stage and occasionally giving the performers some lines. The actual rubric, Kierkegaard said, was theatre, to be sure. Only God is the audience, the professionals — the clergy and musician are the prompters and the actors are the congregation — people who have come to do an act of worship.

Well, try telling that to Mrs. Smith whose very description of what she is doing at 11am on Sunday is eloquent. “I think I’ll go hear Dr. Adams this morning.” Or Mr. Jones who lets you know that the organist played the hymns so loud or so fast that you ruined his morning. Or Ms. Brown who ruined your morning by calling to say she’s going to Willowcreek for services from now on because she doesn’t “get anything out of worship” at old First Church and besides Willowcreek has coffee and bagels with low-fat cream cheese, before and after, and a Tai Chi class on Monday morning!

Or, for that matter, while I’m on the subject, try telling Melissa and Kevin that it isn’t actually “their wedding”, it’s the Church’s wedding, which they want the church to celebrate for them, so it’s no more appropriate to write their own vows than it would be to create your own Baptismal questions, but I digress.

My concern with what is euphemistically called “Contemporary Worship” is not at all with its contemporaneity but with its narcissism: its intellectual shift of the focus of the act of worship from God to the individual worshiper: from the praise and adoration of the Almighty to the emotional stimulation of Mr. Jones and Ms. Brown.

Marva Dawn in *A Royal “Waste” of Time*, writes: “If we sing only narcissistic ditties, we will develop a faith that depends on feelings and that is inward-curved instead of outward-turned.” (p. 68)

The same critique should be made of preaching: Sermons that refocus congregational attention on the preacher, are no better than narcissistic praise music, only a whole lot longer.

God is the point. Feelings, emotions are not bad, God forbid. It is a matter of heart as well as mind and spirit. But God, not the emotions or feelings of the congregation is the point and a point we need to remember — because one of our basic needs is a longing, a veritable hunger for God. And if somewhere in our own hearts we don't believe that there's not much purpose in the whole exercise except our own ego-needs to be listened to and complimented.

Douglas John Hall, who wrote so powerfully and profoundly about the end of Christendom and, by the way, the Beginning of Christianity, says we have four well documented needs:

- Meaning and Purpose
- Moral Authenticity
- Community
- Transcendence — some experience of the Holy, the Other, that which is greater than me, greater than all of us put together, the transcendent.

In the final analysis I'm going to put my money on Hall and on the great liturgical traditions that are ours rather than on the narcissism of the moment.

Besides, the traditions themselves, particularly the Reformed Tradition, is based on taking the world as seriously as possible, using the best of what human beings create and write and sing and build and act and employ in the praise and adoration of God.

Marva Dawn writes:

> "Music, songs, sermons, liturgical form, architecture, are all means by which God invites, reveals, and forms us. If we use shallow (she did not say simple) materials, they will not reveal truth about God. Instead, shallow materials will shape shallow theology and form us superficially; songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or banal music belie the coherence and integrity of God." (p. 67)
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> "The Church," she says, "needs preachers and musicians with great faithfulness to give worship participants what they need instead of what they think they need, to offer that which is needful instead of catering to neediness." (p.68)

But isn't that terribly presumptuous, elitist even? Isn't it hierarchical to assume that we, with our Ivy League/graduate school degrees, know what people need? No, it's why we're here. I'll risk a little political incorrectness by suggesting it's why we insist on all this rigorously intellectual activity before presuming to lead anything. Plumbing the depths of the human spirit, the human heart, from the perspective of human culture, not monoculture, by the way, but the amazing polychrome miracle of human culture — human philosophy, science, theology and supremely human art, is what we are supposed to be doing here, but also as life-long learners and teachers and leaders; so that yes, it's OK and in fact responsible to conclude that Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring is a better choice than "I adore you, I magnify you, I love you, Jesus": or that Taize's "Jesus, Remember me, When You Come Into Your Kingdom" is indeed better and more authentic, more rooted in the Biblical, Theological tradition as well as the artistic climate of our century, than a sentimental love song to King Jesus.

I'm not at all convinced that traditional worship is no longer viable and that people fine it boring, irrelevant, and uninteresting. Or, put more accurately, there is nothing about traditional worship that must, of necessity, be boring, irrelevant, and uninteresting. It often is. You and I know it, but it's not because it's traditional. Boring and uninteresting worship can come in any style. I would make the case that traditional worship has a far better chance of being energetic, creative, interesting, because there is so much more to work with. I'm so tired of hearing the pipe organ blamed — for anything. A pipe organ played by an energetic, creative, and lively musician is irresistible, an organ played by a boring, unimaginative musician is boring, but then so is an electric guitar played by a boring guitarist.

At Fourth Presbyterian Church we are almost as traditional as we can be. The liturgy is pure Reformed; the prayers and responses are from the The Book of Common Worship, the hymns are from The Hymnal. But the music is thoughtfully chosen, carefully coordinated with the theological themes of the day, and lovingly and energetically presented for the congregation's worship. The choir is robed and so are the clergy: in black, with clerical collars and Geneva Tabs. People sit in pews in a 1914 Gothic sanctuary with absolutely no architectural space to do much of anything in except worship, Reformed style. And that is what we do, four times every Sunday, with a full sanctuary at 9:30 and 11:00am.

In 17 years, I have never heard anyone say that worship is boring, or that we need to change styles in order to be relevant. That's not quite true. One formerly active member regularly tells me that our liturgy is out of date, and sends me tapes and CD's of praise music. But he's unhappy with everything Presbyterian these days and obviously unhappy with me on a lot

of fronts. But what I have heard, over and over again, is gratitude for the integrity and power and opportunity to reflect on the mystery of life and death, of love and passion, of human hopes and dreams and fears, and the God who creates and loves and graces all of life.

We are not boring. We add brass once a month and a children's choir at 9:30 weekly. We try to mix old and new hymns, spirituals, and Isaac Watts. We parade in and out on Palm Sunday and light lots of candles at Christmas, and week in and week out, preachers take their homiletic responsibility and opportunity with the utmost of seriousness. And week in and week out, John Sherer and friends, bring to worship their amazing musicianship, but even more importantly — commitment to the act of public worship.

There's a lot to read on the subject but Marva Dawn's chapter Keeping God as the Infinite Center of Our Worship, chapter 11, in *A Royal "Waste" of Time,* is, from my perspective, one of the most thoughtful and helpful.

She offers five guidelines which I would pass along, along with my own editorial observations and amplification.

1. The Tradition — Don't throw it out before understanding it. And don't cling to it without understanding it. Teach people why we start with praise and move to confession, why sermons come before the offering and not after. Part of what it means to be a Protestant is the commitment to continuing reformation, to on-going response by the church to what's going on around it. Professor Brain Gerrish reminds us that the "inclination to revise theology as a response to what's happening in the world is a part of the theological methodology of both Luther and Calvin." The tradition itself is lively. You don't have to make it relevant. You simply need to be open, imaginative, and responsive to the world and to the Spirit.
2. Don't sacrifice substance for style. This does not mean, don't use contemporary music at all. Just don't use trite music and simplistic resources which trivialize God and the whole experience. I love the fact that the Fourth Presbyterian Church Morning Choir can do an elegant Vivaldi "Gloria" and close the service with a Dave Brubeck "Amen."
3. Don't confuse evangelism with worship. Dawn is big on this one. Seeker services are not worship, she reminds us. Worship is directed toward God.
4. Find good contemporary music. Taize and Iona are a starting point.
5. Find a way between antiquariasim and faddishness.

I've been standing up in front of a congregation to lead weekly worship for 42 years. For the past 25 or so of those years, I have asked the

congregation to pray with me before the sermon. "Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your word."

It seems, finally, an appropriate way to move to a conclusion.

One of my mentors was the late Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago. Sittler was a good Lutheran, an eloquent writer and preacher and lecturer who thought and taught that the theological starting point for all of us is awe — at the mystery, the unknowingness of God, and consequently our own theological modesty. We should never claim to know too much, Sittler taught.

Sittler lamented that modern life, modern religion, modern churches, seem to be a conspiracy against awe and mystery. In a treasure of a little book he wrote shortly before he died, Grace Notes and Other Fragments, he said "Our congregational life is so deeply sunk in monodimensional and totally secularized culture as largely to have lost ear, eye, and heart for a word or deed that asserts a totally different possibility."

Sittler used to worry that we are far too casual about worship (And this was two decades before Megachurches, Seeker-Services, and Praise Bands). He was actually irritated by what he thought was "overly friendly" worship which he termed "chatty spirituality" — which exudes confidence that it is no big deal to call on the name of the Lord, nor to presume to come into the divine presence. Sittler used to attend Roman Catholic High Mass or a Greek Orthodox service occasionally just to be reminded of the mystery. (It reminds me of something Edith Blumenthal, who teaches at Wheaton College, told me recently — namely that a lot of Wheaton students, known for conservative evangelicalism, are turning up at the local Greek Orthodox Church for Mass.) Joe Sittler became apoplectic (as do I, and I hope I won't offend any of you) when he visited a church on Sunday morning, usually served by one of his former students, and the minister, instead of calling the congregation into the awesome presence of the most high God of creation, began the liturgy with "Good Morning!" as if he were greeting them at the Super Market, and if the congregation did not respond energetically enough, repeated it louder, "Good Morning!!!" as if the worshippers were a gaggle of kindergarteners not quite awake.

I simply won't do it: won't respond no matter how cheerful the leader — with a "Good Morning." I sit in silent protest. I haven't come to see him or her. I've come to meet God and I'll respond to "The Lord Be with You" or some such reminder of why we are all there. But not "Hi, My name's John. What's yours?"

We live in interesting times, do we not? Postmodernism has washed away the world with which most of us are familiar. We have to learn a new

vocabulary and a new geography and now new global politics. September 11, 2001 continues to exert an enormous impact on us and our people.

Part of what is in the very air out there is a longing for certainty, for something to hold on to.

And in the midst of that here comes traditional religion with a very serious and very precious proposal — namely a God whose very Godness transcends everything that is happening in the world, yet is somehow deeply present in it: A God whose very Godness is behind all of life, all of existence, but who also loves each of us as if were only one of us to love: a God who lives in unknowing mystery, but comes as close as human love, a human birth, a very human life.

That's our job: to treasure that, and appropriate it, and create opportunities for our people to experience it and live into what Rudolf Otto 80 years ago called The Mysterium Tremendum.

Otto wrote:

> "the feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden emptiness out of the depths of the soul… It may become the hushed, trembling, speechless humility of the creature in the presence of whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible." (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 14)

Startle us, O God, with your truth.

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